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ABSTRACT

Issues in school choice as a method for achieving educational reform are discussed in this booklet. The first part provides a brief historical background of the school choice movement, including an analysis of the issues being debated over the marketplace theories and the general philosophy behind school choice. The second part highlights a few of the existing plans on public schools of choice in the United States, both interdistrict and intradistrict--in Minnesota; Indianapolis, Indiana; Eugene, Oregon; East Harlem, New York; and San Diego, California. Programs for controlled choice and for achieving desegregation are described. Current state legislation dealing with school choice is also reviewed. The third part discusses the conditions necessary for accessible and equitable choice programs, including such issues as racial balance, transportation, community participation, and financing. A conclusion is that school choice is not the sole vehicle for restructuring student performance, but it can serve as a catalyst for bringing about change. Recommendations are made to provide transportation, involve parents, reaffirm public schools, make funding equitable, and give every school the opportunity to improve. (Contains 20 references.) (LMI)

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School Choice: Issues and Answers

Susan Uchitelle

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SUSAN UCHITELLE

Susan Uchitelle is executive director of the Voluntary Interdistrict Coordinating Council in St. Louis. The council was established to carry out the 1983 settlement agreement by the U.S. Federal District Court for a desegregation plan involving the St. Louis Public Schools and all the suburban school districts – one of the early comprehensive school choice plans.

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The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of her colleague, Daniel Watson, who researched some of the school choice programs described in this fastback.

Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson

School Choice: Issues and Answers

by
Susan Uchitelle

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Introduction

School choice is currently the most frequently mentioned method of achieving educational reform, a concern that has consumed the education community and the public at large over the past decade. School choice is praised in task force reports and hailed by educators and politicians from coast to coast. Segments from both the public and non-public school sectors promote school choice as the catalyst for change and reform. In response to the call for restructuring and change, a variety of school choice plans have evolved.

As of February 1992, 42 states have considered, introduced, or enacted some kind of choice legislation. While the legislation in each state varies, clearly school choice has become a priority for many state legislatures in the last several years. Each state has tailored its legislation to meet the specific interests of different constituencies; and each plan has different funding mechanisms and different target audiences.

In some states school choice is restricted to options only within a local school district. In other states the specific choice plans have resulted from school desegregation mandates, including controlled choice, interdistrict or intradistrict transfers, magnet schools, or specialty programs, such those in Kansas City (Mo.), St. Louis, Milwaukee, and Charlotte (N.C.). Other states, such as Minnesota, have enacted legislation to provide interdistrict choice options as well as postsecondary options for high school students. State money follows the student to the receiving school, but transportation is not provided.

This fastback provides a brief historical background of the school choice movement, including an analysis of the issues being debated over the marketplace theories and the general philosophy behind school choice. It highlights just a few of the many existing choice plans around the country, both intradistrict and interdistrict, giving the reader a flavor of the kinds of choices that do exist in the public sector. Current state legislation dealing with school choice is reviewed to show the important role of state governments in promoting and facilitating school choice.

This fastback also discusses the conditions that must prevail to make choice programs accessible and equitable, including such issues as racial balance, transportation, community participation, financing, and commitment to making choice programs available to those who need them the most. The fastback concludes with a discussion of school choice issues still needing to be addressed.

History and Background of the School Choice Movement

The release in 1983 of *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Educational Excellence gave birth to the current reform movement, which focused on educational excellence. Designed to be a catalyst for much-needed revitalization and change, the report spawned a flurry of activity – task forces, governors' panels, state legislation, and local reform efforts – all focusing on ways to upgrade our education system, which was viewed as failing to prepare our youth to meet the challenges of the 21st century. A crisis mentality pervaded the nation. Presidents Reagan and Bush saw revitalizing our education system as the key to our nation's future. Both, however, were equally determined that financing these major reforms was to be primarily the responsibility of state and local governments. Funding for education was no longer a federal government priority as it had been since President Johnson's "Great Society" programs.

The response to *A Nation at Risk* was overwhelming, at least in the policy arena. Educational change became a priority for governors and state departments of education across the country. Restructuring, accountability, and educational excellence were high on the agendas of policy makers – the National Governors' Association, most state commissioners and state boards of education, local school boards, superintendents, and state legislators. State after state responded with reform bills that included such provisions as: increasing graduation requirements, lengthening the school year and day, requiring more

science and math for graduation, providing career ladders for teachers, mandating more testing of students, and initiating some kind of school choice within the public sector.

The ultimate goal of these school reforms was to improve the literacy skills of our youth for the work force of the future and to achieve a higher level of productivity and competitiveness for the nation. In the view of many, we were falling further and further behind the rest of the industrialized world in both productivity and academic achievement. Many expressed concern that America's schools were no longer serving their clientele. Student and family needs had changed; yet schools, regardless of various initiatives, remained virtually the same. These concerns became the focus of attention for the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, state education agencies, governors, business communities, school boards, and school districts.

Recommendations from *A Nation at Risk* came on the heels of earlier reforms that had been implemented and were strongly supported by the federal government. During the 1960s and 1970s direct federal dollars, federal matching funds, ESEA funds, and other federally supported programs had become the norm. But in the 1980s these sources dried up. There was virtually no additional federal funding to support these reforms, and state and local resources were at a premium. The fiscal responsibility as well as the decision making were deferred to the state and local districts. Only the rhetoric remained at the federal level.

Among the reform efforts resulting from *A Nation at Risk*, school choice, in particular, somehow was elevated to a policy issue at the national level through the efforts of some prominent scholars who advocated a marketplace theory of schooling. They argued that if parents had a choice of the school their children attended, they would become a powerful force for bringing about school improvement; that is, if you give parents choice, you also give them the leverage for change. And if the school does not improve, it will have no clients

and cease to exist. For the first time, the marketplace concept of free choice was to be extended wholesale to education – both public and non-public.

School choice became the dominant reform theme for Presidents Reagan and Bush. Both saw choice as a way to bring about education reform and school restructuring with little, if any, federal funds. Reagan wanted to implement a voucher system for both public and non-public schooling. Bush initially emphasized choice in the public sector, but later in his term began to include private schools as well. Many politicians saw choice as an inexpensive way to bring about much-needed educational reform. On the other hand, most educators who are proponents of choice saw it as a possible catalyst for change but not a panacea for improving public education. Regardless of the different viewpoints, school choice has become a major political and policy issue in the last decade – an issue that is not likely to go away.

During the 1980s "restructuring" became a buzz word. School choice was viewed as one of the means of accomplishing restructuring. School choice would create unique and measurably different kinds of schools. If consumers (parents) could decide on the kind of school they wanted their children to attend, the choice option would change not only the traditional notions about school attendance areas but also would give parents the right to select the educational program they deemed best for their children. Thus schools would have to respond to the desires of their constituents if they were to survive.

Proponents of school choice make many assumptions. Among them are: it gives teachers the opportunity to choose an environment in which they can best teach; it offers parents greater satisfaction; it engages students more effectively and should result in better outcomes because of the match of "shared values"; and student achievement is higher. As yet, however, there are no data sufficient to acknowledge or refute any of these assumptions.

Much has been written about school choice. One of the earliest proponents of school choice was Milton Friedman, the Nobel Prize

economist, who proposed a plan for publicly financed education vouchers as early as 1962. In 1978 the federal government experimented with the voucher idea in Alum Rock, California, a project that continued over five years and formed the cornerstone for other choice programs. In 1985 President Reagan proposed a voucher program for the disadvantaged. Following up on Reagan's proposal, the National Governors' Association endorsed parental choice as an educational priority (Elmore 1988). Coons and Sugarman (1978), probably the best-known proponents, advocated that parental preference should take precedence over geographic place of residence.

In fact, this country has long had a form of choice within its several different schooling structures – public, private, and parochial, with many variations within each. However, except for certain federal and state entitlement programs, only public schools are supported by tax dollars.

Perhaps the most controversial issue arising from the school choice movement is: Should public funds be used to educate any children who choose to transfer to a school of their choice, public or private, or should public funds be spent only for public schools?

It took Chubb and Moe in their book, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (1990), to dramatize the controversy over school choice. They argue that the public school system is not working because its structure promotes "characteristics anathema to effective performance" (p. 21). And they go on to assert that a marketplace setting for schooling is the only way to bring about effective reform, contending that school choice is a reform with "its own rationale and justification" (p. 217).

Chubb and Moe postulate that the public school bureaucracy discourages promising practices and inhibits individual initiative, whereas a marketplace approach will force schools to become more flexible and responsive to their clientele. They argue that a free market will promote school autonomy and give parents greater control of school outcomes, since the school will need to satisfy its clientele in order to remain in business.

These authors believe that if schools have a clientele committed to common educational goals, they will be less bureaucratic. They contend that it is the rigid bureaucratic structure that hinders student achievement. Inherent in their argument is the belief that nonpublic schools are more effective than public schools because they are less bureaucratic. Chubb and Moe argue that small, autonomous, nonpublic schools, operating under marketplace principles, produce higher student achievement. They claim that changing a school's bureaucratic structure can raise achievement levels by one full year in a five-year period (p. 180).

There are many unsubstantiated and disputed claims in Chubb and Moe's arguments. It has not yet been shown that the factor of school choice alone results in higher academic achievement. In fact, Henry Levin points out in *Choice and Control in American Education* (1990) that statistically there is only about one-tenth of a standard deviation difference in student performance in private schools compared to public schools and that background factors may account for these differences. Other studies to date show very little convincing evidence that private schools are more effective in improving achievement than are public schools.

Choice in the public sector flourished as part of the reforms of the 1970s in the form of alternative schools, magnet schools, and school-within-a-school structures. The reforms of the 1980s tended to ignore existing school choice alternatives. As will be pointed out in this fastback, many different types of school choice plans are currently operating in the public sector. They are programs designed to serve specific student needs and include creative ways to finance alternative school options. Today many schools of choice are working well – in individual districts, in numerous magnet programs, within schools in districts, and across district lines.

Viable choice plans designed to improve education and meet students' needs are complex operations and expensive to implement. If school choice is to be available to all children, we must willing to

pay for high-quality programs, student transportation, and recruitment campaigns targeted at all ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

Spotlight on Public Schools of Choice

This chapter spotlights several public school choice programs. These are programs that offer parents a variety of educational settings and allow them to choose the environment they feel is most appropriate for their children. They are schools that offer parents an alternative to neighborhood schools that they consider inadequate. They strive to overcome educational inequities. They are open to all, not just to those families who know how to take advantage of the system. They do not drain limited resources from the system even though they cost more than the average school in the system. Nor do they siphon off all the most-able students to the detriment of other schools in the system, as is often claimed. Certainly they appeal to the more motivated family. But the solution to improving our schools does not end with implementing school choice; it is but the beginning of a long and ongoing process of change.

When reviewing the choice plans described here, keep in mind the following factors, which undergird the argument for school choice:

1. There are many ways to educate children; there is no one best program.
2. Diversity is desirable, and school choice provides that diversity.
3. The act of choosing empowers parents and makes them more responsible.

4. Schools should not take their clientele for granted.
5. Choice creates new and more involved roles for parents and faculty.
6. Administrators develop new and more dynamic leadership styles.
7. Parents become true participants and partners in the education of their children.
8. Principals feel greater responsibility for the success of their schools.
9. Efforts to find sufficient funds result in some very creative mechanisms for fund raising.
10. When teachers are in a setting that is more congruent with their teaching styles, they take a significant role in developing programs and making decisions.

All the choice plans described here were initiated in different ways. Some of the programs were developed out of a need to remedy historic patterns of racial segregation, with school choice becoming an integral part of that remedy. Others were created by teachers who wanted to engage children and parents. Some were developed by principals who were dissatisfied with the previous program. Still others came from state initiatives.

The school choice plans described here are only a few of the many now operating. They are cited primarily because they have been in existence for a minimum of three to five years and because they represent different kinds of choice programs, thus giving the reader a perspective on the variety of alternatives that exist. For more detailed information about school choice programs, the reader should consult the references at the end of this fastback, particularly *Improving Schools and Empowering Parents: Choice in American Education* (Paulu 1989), a report based on the White House workshop on choice in education, and the December 1989 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*.

The Minnesota Experience

Probably the most extensive options for school choice are found in the state of Minnesota. This state enacted legislation that opened the door to postsecondary enrollment options for high school students, open enrollment across district boundaries, area learning centers, and some public/private transportation opportunities. Minnesota's legislation in effect declares that school choice belongs to families; and the law establishes standard guidelines to encourage choice opportunities. Legislation allows students in the public sector to attend any school they are interested in if they have transportation to the school and there is space. In 1987-1988 the school choice option was implemented giving Minnesota secondary students the opportunity to enroll in alternative schools, special classes in other school districts, college courses at local institutions, and even some specific centers of learning for special students. The only criteria were that the transfer does not disrupt the racial balance of either the sending or the receiving school and that there is space in the receiving school.

Initially, school districts could volunteer to participate in the school choice program. As of 1990, all school districts in the state had to allow students the option of leaving their home district, though individual districts could set criteria governing acceptance of incoming students consistent with space available and district policy. In Minnesota, the state's per-pupil funding follows the student to the receiving district. This is one example of a state initiative available to students throughout the entire state.

Minneapolis and St. Paul are probably the two communities that have taken the greatest advantage of this statewide initiative. St. Paul, with its extensive magnet school program, has about 55 of its schools involved at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels. Students in the St. Paul Public Schools may attend their neighborhood school or apply to attend a magnet school. In some cases, the neighborhood school may be a magnet school. Students who live in a magnet school attendance area are given preference if they choose

to attend it. Some magnets are citywide and do not have an attendance area.

Parents who wish to have their children attend a magnet school must complete an application and return it to the magnet school office by early April. Selection of students to the magnet schools is based on racial balance guidelines. Preference is given to students who live in the attendance areas of each magnet school or in preference zones established by the board of education. A sibling priority was implemented for the 1992-93 school year only, as part of a study being conducted by the district. A random selection process is used for accepting students in each of the magnet schools when racial balance is not achieved or when there are more applicants than openings. Students not accepted go on a waiting list and are contacted as openings become available. Transportation is provided according to district eligibility rules.

A joint integration exchange has been established between the St. Paul Public Schools and neighboring Roseville Area Schools. St. Paul students may apply to attend Roseville's Parkview Center Schools, and Roseville students may apply to attend the Open School in St. Paul. Transportation is not provided between districts.

All St. Paul's magnet high schools are specialty programs within comprehensive high schools. Students elect to enroll in the regular program or the specialty program at the high school of their choice. Students may list up to two choices on their application. A counselor from the high school comes to the elementary or junior high school the applicants attend to register them and make class schedules.

Minneapolis has a smaller school choice program. Its initial choice plan began in 1969-1970 under the leadership of then superintendent John B. Davis. Initially called the South East Alternatives (SEA), the project involved community and school staff in planning a system of alternative elementary schools located in the southeast neighborhood of Minneapolis. The alternatives included a traditional, open, continuous progress, and free school. SEA was implemented as a choice

program, not a desegregation program. However, when the district began to desegregate in 1973, the SEA program became the model for the choice program used to facilitate desegregation.

At the elementary level, all families are allowed to choose from among 13 alternative and/or magnet schools. Most families make their choice when their children enter kindergarten. At the secondary level, approximately 10% to 15% of the students are involved in choice programs in some way. At the middle school level, some choices are available. At the high school level, students may choose from among 14 magnets located in comprehensive high schools. The program is primarily intradistrict, although interdistrict transfers are possible. Choice is controlled based on space available and on desegregation guidelines for racial balance. Transportation is provided for all students who participate.

School choice is widely accepted by families in Minneapolis. In fact, many families had been instrumental in promoting the expansion of choice in other parts of the city.

Indianapolis: Key School

The Key School is a K-6 elementary school, one of the choice options in the Indianapolis Public Schools. (Indianapolis also has an interdistrict choice program with nearby suburban districts.) Housed in an older building, the Key School began operation in 1987. Its students come from all parts of the city and are admitted on a lottery basis in accordance with the district's desegregation guidelines. Approximately 40% are African-American.

The Key School curriculum is based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (see fastback 342 *Teaching for Multiple Intelligences* by David G. Lazear). This theory postulates that humans possess not one, but seven relatively autonomous intellectual competencies. They are: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal intelligence. Teachers are encouraged to tap into each child's strengths in each of

these intelligence areas, not just the linguistic and logical-mathematical areas, which traditionally have dominated the curriculum.

Key School is organized by mixed-age groups (grades 1-3 and grades 4-6). Four days a week students spend time in mixed-age groupings or "pods," which parents and students select, and work on activities in a particular cognitive area. Students also spend time each week in a special "flow-activity center," which includes games, puzzles, audiotapes, and other materials geared to one of the seven intelligences. By allowing students to pursue areas of interest, teachers hope to capitalize on their intrinsic motivation.

The curriculum is integrated around schoolwide themes, which change every nine weeks. By the end of the nine-week cycle, each student will have carried out a project to illustrate the theme. In addition to the regular academic areas, all students receive daily instruction from specialists in physical education, music (including violin), art, Spanish, and computers.

Student evaluation is done using student portfolios. One component of the portfolio is a videotape that documents children's interests and accomplishments. The portfolio also includes an initial interview and samples of the student's work throughout the year. Students also keep a reflective log with weekly entries about school themes and projects.

The Key School concept is unusual in that it was initiated and designed by the teachers and their principal. The curriculum was developed collaboratively by teachers, parents, and community members. It has been extremely successful in improving attendance, raising achievement, and involving the community. It is visited by educators from around the country.

Controlled School Choice Programs

Other types of school choice programs, found in Seattle, Boston, and Cambridge, Mass., are called "controlled school choice." They were introduced to eliminate segregation, while at the same time al-

lowing students access to all schools and special programs within the school district. Student assignment is determined by space availability and racial balance. Parents may state a school preference, and school officials attempt to match students with the school or program of their choice. In these three communities, parents may choose a particular school or a school-within-a-school plan. The choices range from foreign languages to computer-assisted instruction to open classroom settings.

Boston serves as an example of how controlled choice operates. Its choice plan began in 1989 as a result of complaints from parents that their children were being bused from one segregated school to another. The earlier court-ordered desegregation plan did not take into account demographic changes that caused desegregated schools to become re-segregated.

The Boston controlled choice program has three goals: school desegregation, school improvement, and school choice. All 57,000 students in the Boston school system participate in the program. The city is divided into three attendance zones. Each zone is supposed to be equal in terms of the the range and quality of education available. The program is promoted through Parent Information Centers in each zone.

Students may apply to any school in their attendance zone. Parents and students are asked to select five or six schools in order of preference. In early spring the district makes placements based on the applications submitted. No student is guaranteed a placement. However, 85% to 90% of the students get their first- or second-choice school. A lottery is used to place students when there are more applicants than available spaces. All schools within an attendance zone are available to students living in the zone, and 50% of the students in a school's walk zone have preference within school desegregation guidelines. Transportation is provided.

Controlled choice has had a positive impact on parental involvement, especially with the assistance of the Parent Information Centers.

As each school works to make itself attractive to students, school quality has improved. The U.S. District Court has seen fit to withdraw its daily monitoring of desegregation in Boston based on the results of the controlled choice program.

The choice process serves, in a sense, as a referendum on which schools are not measuring up. These schools are targeted for upgrading immediately. Zone School Improvement Councils have been set up to assist in this task. Funding pupil transportation remains a serious problem for Boston's controlled choice program.

Eugene, Oregon

Another good example of school choice is the program in Eugene, Oregon, which has been in existence for about 18 years. In this district with an enrollment of about 17,700, students may attend their neighborhood school or apply to any other school in the district that has room. Students attending a school other than their neighborhood school must provide their own transportation.

The district offers 15 alternative schools and 36 regular schools. The application period for transfers is the first day of school in January through 30 days prior to the beginning of the fall term. If there are more applicants than spaces available, placement is done by lottery in March.

District 4, East Harlem

One of the most widely publicized school choice programs is in Community District 4, East Harlem, in New York City. The program, which began in 1974, is based on the premise that choice is crucial to maintaining the vitality of educational institutions. The open zoning concept in Community District 4 offers a variety of schools for students and parents to select from. Students may choose from among 50 magnet or specialty programs. Options range from environmental studies to performing arts to science and mathematics to the humanities.

Every school allows its teachers and directors to hire the staff and to schedule courses. The schools are organized around particular themes to which administrators, teachers, parents, and students are committed. Students are free to apply to those schools that they feel will best meet their needs.

Each spring, sixth-graders, in consultation with their teacher and parents, go through a decision-making process, beginning with exercises in self-evaluation and making choices. This prepares them to select three junior high schools in order of preference. Some schools address particular interests, such as music or science. Others have a more general liberal arts approach. All schools have their own style and focus, but the focus may change based on parental interest.

Parents are encouraged to attend the School Choice Fair held in December, where each junior high has an exhibit outlining its program. Parents are then urged to visit the three junior high schools that interest them the most. Parents list their preferences on an application, which is returned to the student's current teacher. The teacher forwards the application to the Office of Alternative Schools.

The applications are first sent to the school students and parents have selected as their first-choice. Schools have three weeks to select students using selection criteria that have been included in the descriptions for each school. Schools retain the applications of the students selected and send the applications of children who have not been selected to their second-choice school. The process is continued through a third round for students who have not been selected for their first- or second-choice schools. Students not selected by a school are placed by the Office of Alternative Schools. Acceptance letters for all schools are mailed to parents no later than June 1.

Free or half-priced bus or subway passes are available to all students in the district who live farther than specified distances from the school of their choice. Students from outside the district use public transportation.

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The choice program in Community District 4 has resulted in increased reading and math scores, higher teacher morale, a decline in truancy, and a restoration of order. And many more students are placed in specialized high school programs as a result of their increased academic abilities. Because of the unique programs offered, there has been an influx of non-minority students enrolling in a district whose student population is predominantly minority.

Choice Programs for Achieving Desegregation

Some urban school districts have implemented choice programs for purposes of achieving desegregation. For example the Kansas City, Missouri, school system has developed an extensive system of school choice by converting all schools to magnet schools with specific themes. Students pick the school of their choice according to the magnet theme. Most of the transfers are within the district, although some students attend from the suburbs. The state provides transportation by court order.

Across the state in St. Louis, a significant interdistrict choice program has been developed between the city of St. Louis and 16 suburban school districts. This program resulted from a settlement agreement of a desegregation lawsuit. Students who live in the city may choose to attend any of the 16 suburban districts. Each district submits to the Interdistrict Coordinating Council information about its schools – pupil/teacher ratios, special programs, size of district, number of schools, unique emphasis, college admission rates, school goals, etc. This information is compiled into a booklet and sent to every city family that has children eligible to transfer. Eligibility is based on attendance in a predominantly black, city public school.

Interested parents fill out applications starting in January for the next school year. If there is space, according to the pupil/teacher ratio established by the receiving district's board policy, students are allowed to transfer. Once transferred, the Interdistrict Coordinating Council provides counselling and follow-up services. Transportation

is provided, as well as fiscal incentives to both receiving and sending districts. Costs are paid by the state.

The same conditions apply for students from the suburban districts choosing to enroll in St. Louis schools. They may choose to attend one of the 27 magnet schools in the city or any other city school, with transportation provided. Students within the city of St. Louis also may apply to any of 27 magnet schools and programs. The final decision is made by lottery in mid-March. The interdistrict school choice program in St. Louis is currently one of largest in the nation. It has been very successful as an urban-suburban model, but it is expensive to operate because of transportation and incentive payments.

San Diego: Year-Round School Options

The San Diego school system offers still a different kind of choice opportunity. One of its interesting options is its year-round school schedule. Three types of school schedules are available in San Diego:

1. Traditional: September to June
2. Year-round: 45 days on, 15 days off
3. Multi-track year-round: groups of students alternate, with 45 days on, 15 days off

Most secondary schools follow the traditional schedule, while elementary schools may be traditional, year-round, or multi-track year-round. There also are two types of magnet schools: total magnet and school-within-a-school magnet.

Application for magnet schools may be made at any time. However, the ethnic balance of both sending and receiving schools and the enrollment priorities of the magnet program must be considered before applications are approved.

Elementary applications received prior to May 1 receive priority for July (year-round schedule) and September (traditional schedule) openings in magnet programs. Those received after May 1 are processed as additional openings become available. Secondary ap-

plications received before March 31 are given priority for September openings. Those received after March 31 are processed as openings become available. Secondary students in certain attendance areas must apply even if the magnet program is at their neighborhood school. No sibling priority is given. The district provides free transportation for students attending magnet programs outside of their geographic school boundary.

Components of a Successful School Choice Program

School choice is being touted by politicians and certain interest groups as a panacea to school reform. Their premise is that if parents can choose the school their children will attend, then they will be more committed to supporting the school, their children will be more eager to go to school, and the school will be more responsive to student needs. What has not been taken into account in many of the school choice proposals are several fundamental factors necessary to make school choice successful. This chapter will discuss some of these factors, using as an example the school choice options in St. Louis.

The St. Louis model is one of the largest urban school choice programs in the country in terms of number of participants. The intradistrict choice component involving magnet schools began in 1976, and the interdistrict program involving suburban districts began in 1981. Although the program was initiated as a result of a court-ordered settlement in a desegregation case, its implementation offers lessons to anyone considering establishing choice options in a school district.

The choice program in St. Louis is very costly. Each student who chooses to transfer to another school is provided free transportation by the state. The state also reimburses to the receiving district the per-pupil cost of educating that student. Although costly, the strength of this program is that choice is truly open to all students, regardless of socioeconomic class or place of residence.

A marketing strategy has been devised to keep families throughout the metropolitan area informed regularly of their choice options. These choices are honored until such time as a receiving district has filled its spaces for the coming year. Currently there are more than 13,000 students transferring from the city of St. Louis public schools to 16 of the 23 suburban school districts in the St. Louis metropolitan area, where the proportion of minority enrollment is 25% or less. Nearly 1,000 students transfer into the city from the suburban districts to attend magnet schools and other specialty programs. Another 8,000 students are transferring within the city to attend magnet schools of their choice.

The first component needed for a choice program is equitable access. Under the St. Louis plan, equitable access is provided to students as long as their transfer does not upset the racial balance in the sending or receiving school. In the case of St. Louis, this makes choice options in the interdistrict component available primarily to black students who live in the city and to white students who live in the suburbs. (City magnet schools are available to all students in St. Louis and to white students living in the cooperating suburban districts.)

To encourage equitable access, families are informed of the choice programs through radio, television, and newspaper advertising. In addition, application forms and brochures with more detailed information are mailed directly to the homes of all eligible families in both the city and suburban districts several times throughout the fall and winter. Also, information about the choice plan is disseminated at community fairs and other public events. Parents are encouraged to investigate their options so that they can make informed decisions. Choice is available to low-, middle-, and high-income families alike.

The second essential component is the provision of complete and free transportation services for participating students. Without free transportation, many families would not be able to participate, thus narrowing the mix of students who could transfer and making equal access impossible. Without free transportation, a choice program is

not likely to succeed in urban communities unless the receiving schools are contained in an area that is accessible by walking or by public transportation.

Third, districts accepting transfer students should receive funding for each student equal to the per-pupil cost of educating that student. Since the per-pupil costs vary significantly, depending on the wealth of a district, a fair way to determine an equitable pupil cost would be to average the costs across districts.

Fourth, in any choice plan involving transfers between an urban district and its suburban districts, some resources should be available to help the urban district improve the overall quality of the education it offers. Such resources will help the urban district improve its programs and thus ensure that those students who opt not to exercise choice will have access to quality programs. One of the goals of a choice program should be to maintain overall excellence. If schools lose large numbers of students because they are not doing a good job, then perhaps they should cease to exist. But first they should be given every opportunity to improve within a reasonable period of time.

Fifth, funds should be available to improve school facilities in urban districts where buildings have have not been properly maintained. Many parents will not select a dilapidated school if alternatives exist, no matter how sound its educational program may be. Funding for extensive facilities upgrade is an integral component of a choice plan.

A word of caution is in order when analyzing school choice plans. State legislatures are in a quandary over such issues as what kind of choice options to provide, how to fund them, whether it will cost more, how to allocate funds for transferring students, whether to provide transportation, whether to restrict them to public schools or to include private/parochial schools, and whether to offer them to all students or just for students from low-income families. Despite all these unresolved issues, there appears to be a frantic effort to jump on the school choice bandwagon without too much supportive research as

yet that a change in schooling will produce better outcomes for children. (Data from Community District 4 in East Harlem do show positive results.)

What we can say at this time about school choice is that:

1. It allows different ways for assigning students to schools.
2. It relies on parents' decisions rather than automatic school assignment.
3. It allows for different ways of allocating resources for school choice plans.
4. It tends to increase students' motivation, since they are allowed to go to a school they are interested in.
5. It offers stability for those students who often move from school to school, as often happens in urban areas – especially now with so many homeless children.
6. It tends to result in better morale among school staff, because they are involved in creating and developing a specific program, giving them a sense of ownership and mission.
7. It offers the potential for greater parent and community involvement in school activities.
8. It offers different and sometimes unique curricular opportunities.
9. It facilitates racial integration in settings where this may not have been possible otherwise.

Conclusion

School choice has been hailed by politicians and others as the way to restructure our schools and achieve "quality" in education at very little cost. Despite the rhetoric, school choice, in and of itself, will not restructure schools, or break down the bureaucracy, or make significant improvement in student achievement. What school choice can do is to give families the option to select a school that they think will better meet the needs of their children. Having said that, there are certain things that must be done by those who are responsible for implementing school choice:

1. Provide sufficient options so that parents truly have a choice.
2. Develop an ongoing public information program so that all parents in the community are aware that they have a choice and are apprised of what the choice options are.
3. If the choice plan is to be truly equitable, then transportation must be provided for all students if the school selected is not in the neighborhood or on a public transportation line.
4. Resources must be allocated to help improve schools, particularly those in urban areas from which children are leaving.

School choice cannot be viewed as the sole vehicle for restructuring schools and improving student performance. It can, however, be a component of change and reform when there is input from the school staff as well as from parents and other community members so that

everybody feels a sense of ownership. However, choice is but one link in the chain needed to bring about change.

The marketplace approach that views school choice, in and of itself, as the ultimate strategy for reforming our schools needs careful examination. Implicit in the marketplace approach is the assumption that giving parents a choice will improve our schools and increase achievement, since choice would force the schools to be more responsive to their consumers. Yet to date there is very little data to validate this assumption. Parental choice may keep schools from becoming too complacent, may create more curricular diversity, and may give parents a greater sense of ownership and commitment; but it is not a panacea. It can allow access for students who otherwise are assigned to second-class or mediocre environments.

The recent Carnegie report, *School Choice*, (Boyer 1992) casts doubt on increased achievement outcomes of students and indicates that most parents do not have an alternate school in mind and that current state plans "widen the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged."

Yet the report indicates that there are choice programs on a districtwide basis that show many positive results in stimulating parent decision making, reorganizing schools, and putting power in the hands of school people. The report, in essence, supports many of the points mentioned in this fastback; namely, that transportation must be provided for students, parents must be involved, public schooling must be reaffirmed, funding must be equitable, and every school should have the opportunity to improve under a fair choice program.

It also is important to mention that recent data indicate that open enrollment programs are becoming more popular. There appears to be growing support for choice in the public sector. Choice can be a catalyst for examining the components of school improvement.

There is no single or simple answer for something as complex as the educational process. We should stop looking for one. In our efforts to improve schools, we must be prepared to serve a diverse constituency with broadly conceived programs that respond to student

needs. If school choice can be a catalyst for engaging students and their families, for increasing their motivation, and for reforming the curriculum, then we should support the idea. But if nothing else changes in the delivery of education – no new curricula, no reduction of bureaucratic controls, no staff development for teachers, no coordination of social services, or no community involvement – then choice will remain only a smoke screen.

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